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The Impact of Children's Stories in Developing Morality: A Study in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Kate DiCamillo's *Raymie Nightingale*

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Abstract

Most of the Critics all over the world are trying to focus on a new kind of literature which is called "children literature". This kind of literature contains the same characteristics of the adult literature, but it depends on different minds, perceptions and different kinds of experience. It can be considered as an appropriate meditate or for developing mental abilities as well as helping children to be effective thinkers playing positive roles in life. This paper aims to discuss the importance of children literature, not only for its literary value ,but also for its ability to develop and change positively the behaviors and attitudes of children by the moral lessons that it contains. *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott and *Raymie Nightingale* by Kate DiCamillo have been selected for this purpose.

Key words: children literature, novel, moral message, *Little Women* and *Raymie Nightingale*.

الخلاصة

حاول معظم النقاد من جميع أنحاء العالم التركيز على نوع جديد من الأدب من انواع الادب يسمى بأدب الأطفال. هذا النوع يحتوي على نفس خصائص أدب البالغين، لكنه يعتمد على افكار والتصورات والخبرات متنوعة والتي يمكن اعتبارها وسيلة مناسبة لتطوير القدرات العقلية للأطفال بالإضافة إلى مساعدتهم على أن يكونوا مفكرين فعالين يؤدون أدواراً إيجابية في الحياة. تهدف هذه الدراسة الى مناقشة أهمية أدب الأطفال، ليس لقيمته الأدبية فقط، وانما أيضا لقدرته على تطوير وتغيير سلوكيات ومواقف الأطفال بشكل إيجابي من خلال الدروس الأخلاقية التي يتضمنها هذا النوع من الادب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أدب الأطفال، الرواية، الرسالة الأخلاقية، النساء الصغيرات، رايمينا نيتنجيل.

1-Introduction:

Early childhood is a critical stage in terms of child's intellectual, physical, emotional and social development. Physical and Mental abilities develop at a remarkable rate, learning starts from the birth of the child and it continues. Scientific researches reveal that the brain of the human develops faster in the early years. The child's intelligence develops to 50 percent when he is only four years old, and increases to 80 percent when he becomes eight years old. That is the reason behind calling this age as a golden age^[1]. It is believed that the moral notion and performance also develop at an early age. That's why it is necessary to give more consideration to children's education from an early age, including their moral education^[2].

Literature is important in our lives because of its profound impact on the soul with its varied arts and attractive methods, "children literature" is a vital type of literature which is concerned with an important part of any society called "children". This interesting type of literature contributes to the development of children's abilities and prepares them for life. It is meaningful and it has the qualities and characteristics of literature whether it is written as story, poem or any other kind of literature.

"Children's literature" is a very modern type in terms of literature, it develops to its form today after almost two centuries. This does not mean that this type of literature was absent, but literary writing which is specialized in this area is very modern. In the past, fictions, novels and other kinds of literature are transmitted orally by the ancestors from one generation to another^[3].

This branch of literature grows slowly, that is to say there is no concept of childhood corresponding to ours today. People before 1700 ignore this period as a time of innocence and make-believe which should normally act as a shelter to protect them from harsh realities. Even some cultures consider children as people already on their way to adulthood, they do not perceive childhood as its own sacred time that they should value for its experience. Children are treated as miniature adults who are expected to take adult roles and responsibilities, they should listen to and read adult literature.

Researchers date the beginnings of children literature to the first decade of the eighteenth century with *A Little Book for Little Children*, an undated instructional book by John Newbery who is called the father of children literature. In 1744 a publisher, bookseller, and editor, published *A little Pretty-Book*. The book contains pictures of children's games, fables, jingles^[4].

John Locke's books are regarded as a stone corner for English children's literature in the eighteenth century onwards to the late of the nineteenth century. The golden age of the children's literature, is with Carroll's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*. Carroll has a unique understanding of children's minds allowed him to compose successful work.

The concern for the child and the concept of childhood reaches its peak after the Industrial Revolution. Many political, social and foreign radical conceptual influences change the status of the child in the English society such as John's *Some Thoughts*

Concerning Education (1693)^[5] and Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), these factors has contributed in releasing the child from the "pre-adult"^[6] or "miniature adult"^[7], it has given him his own identity.

Today, however, children's literature becomes more interesting than any other time throughout history. Publishing houses today have staffs of editors that specialized in children's books and magazines. Public and school libraries provide thousands of works written and illustrated especially for young readers from the preschool ages through the teens. In addition, some books written for adults like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and the collection of folk tales known as Grimm's *Fairy Tales* have also become extremely popular among young readers. In many countries, authors and artists are awarded annually for their outstanding achievements in children's literature. So what once only existed for moral development now exists political, social problems, parent-child and sexual relationship, that were completely excluded before. Themes for children's fantasy rooted so much in archetype. They indulged in morals, mythology, religion, traditions, and psychology^[8].

In children's literature, we find a great variety of genres that can be classified into five major categories, these are: **folk literature**, **fiction**, **poetry**, **biography** and **informational books**. This study is concerned with fiction.

According to Stanton "Fiction has different levels because readers make different demands. Fiction can enable the reader to use up his spare time pleasantly, to imagine strange places and adventures, to share the emotional experience of the characters"^[9].

Children fiction appears in England as a separate and independent form of literature in the second half of the eighteenth century. Leprince de Beaumont published her fairy tales in London from the 1750s onward the tales were called as children's fiction. The first novel appeared specifically for children in 1765 and was called *The History of Little Goody Two Shoes*^[10].

Writing children fiction is not such a simple process, it demands skillful writers to attract and convince children's minds, once the writer has decided what age group he's working with, the writer should read up on some child psychology and find out how children's minds work at that age. Hence, to write for a child, one must think like a child. Specific range of vocabulary, styles, and structures are used in writing children books, taking into consideration that children's language should be upgraded in children's fiction gradually. Studies reveal that children under the age of 9 are assumed not to have a well-developed appreciation of the pragmatics of those speech situations where the statement of the speaker does not have the faintest concern with the current subject matter, that is why children literature writers are more concerned in making the child understand easily without difficulty regardless of their age^[11]. They intend to make the meaning of text more explicit for them, that is by writing short not long and complex, using physical words not abstract ones, and avoiding odd, unfamiliar words and metaphors. Dialogues and incidence are presented more than description and observation, the tendency is more to the dynamic treatment not the passive^[12]. Repetition of words and phrases makes the text familiar.

Children fiction is important because it helps children to realize themselves and the physical environment they are living in. It makes them able to expose new aspect of their world, which includes plants, animals and other things, it prepares them properly for life, it “teaches girls to be girls and boys to be boys”^[13].

It provides them with a great deal of historical, geographic, religious and scientific background. Fiction expands children's imagination and perceptions, it develops their tendency to read, as well as it enriches their literary sense, they learn how to listen, watch and then interact with the incidence of the story. More over fiction can instill patriotism, which can be considered as a form of emotion that makes children feel themselves part of the community they belong to.

Children stories can be a very interesting way for getting favorable morals and right behaviors as it helps them to define their own subjectivity, but some times children books can play a highly subversive role when they are read against the text (misunderstanding the text). Censorship tends to describe children as simpleminded and impressionable, unable to take a balanced view of, for example, racial or sexual issues^[14]. Today many books have been modified to become more aware of multicultural matters.

Most of the children's narrative texts include common ideas ,that actually create problems for the critics of children literature so to raise above this problem. According to Perry Nodelman, the writer attracts the reader to think about the core meaning of the text not only the surface meaning and that what makes the work distinctive and unique^[15].

2. The Concept of Morality and the Moral Lesson

The notion of morality has been defined by psychologists and philosophers , but in common terms it can be known as a persons or societies interpretation of what is seemed to be the highest good. Such interpretation is based on a set of values, standards and ideas that are used to differentiate between "right" and "wrong". However, the term "good" and what creates happiness has a definite cultural preference, morality generally refers to tendencies and attitudes that confirm, honesty, responsibility and respect . Lickona argues that both respect and responsibility are the two important elements of morality which any other values are derived. The word respect includes two parts, that is self respect and other's respect¹⁶. Responsibility means accepting our own deeds and life, and also obliged to the publicly areal participation in the political, cultural, socio-economic, deeds of the community.

“Morality is viewed as the system of rules that regulate the social interactions and social relationships of individuals within societies and is based on concepts of welfare (harm), trust, justice (comparative treatment and distribution) and rights”^[17]. That makes people decide their motives which are based on their mental capacities to understand a common situation. Mental matters, self-controlling, and flexibility are essential values in moral process.

It can be said that there is no applicable definition for morality because it is used in two different senses **the first** is “descriptive” which refers to a number of behavioral

codes set and accepted by a society or individual persons, and it is important to mention that not all these codes that are set by a society can be considered as morals because there are differences between morality, religion, law and etiquette, this distinction becomes more complex in the large societies^[18]. **The second** sense is “normative” it refers to a behavioral codes set by “rational persons”, they can be considered as “moral agents” they meet certain knowledgeable and voluntarily conditions. However; not all the codes that are accepted by those agents can be considered as “moral codes” because sometimes those “moral agents” can accept certain things like sagacity or prudence as codes while they are not, each of these two (normative and descriptive) can contribute to the meaning of morality^[19].

The distinction between morality and religion, sometimes the morals of certain society are derived from their religion. This means that morals contain some religious justifications and clarification. So religion is larger than morality because it does not only advise and guide people, but it can be regarded as a base for morals and laws. Moreover the principle of deterrence exists in religion more than in morality^[20].

Sometimes writers tend to convey certain ideas to the reader more than what words show, this is called the “implicature meaning” also known as a moral lesson in the story. The writer expects readers to understand that “implicature meaning” by depending on what is explicitly mentioned.

Children need to learn about reasoning which stories can provide a perfect space for them to learn, also provide them models and topics to discuss moral dilemmas, they reflect themselves in the stories they read. Children learn how to face a problem and how to resolve it. Also they learn to be responsible and able to take a right decision in a right time without being afraid. “Nodelman” “says that the good children’s books do not only teach valuable lessons about life, but do so unobtrusively. They make learning fun”^[21].

Macleod argues that children stories teach the readers to be moral, he defends the nature of moralism in children stories he says “tender minds were given...innumerable small tales of temptation resisted, anger restrained, disobedience punished, and forbearance learned”^[22]. While Bettelheim stresses that children literature must help the children to express their emotions, inspire their imagination and guide them to develop their intelligence^[23]. Usually moral messages can be inserted throughout the whole story or just in one sentence at the end.

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott and *Raymie Nightingale* by Kate DiCamillo are taken as examples of stories which contain important moral lessons.

3-The Moral Lesson in *little women* and *Raymie Nightingale*:

Little Women is written by the American writer “Louisa May Alcott” in (1869). The story contains many moral lessons that are going to be discussed below:

The story is about four girls “Jo, Amy, Beth and Meg” and their mother “Marmee March”. Their father leaves them to participate in the Civil War, so the family is left to face many difficulties in each time Mrs. March, the mother supports her daughters not

only to overcome these obstacles, but also to learn by their own mistakes. She enlightens her daughter's minds and enables them to see their flaws. The novel draws many moral lesson for the reader to learn such as mercy, sacrifice, family respect, self-realization, self- confidence, labor appreciation ,modesty^[24].

“Mercy” is the first moral lesson taught in the beginning of the novel²⁵. In spite of the March's poverty, Mrs. March's determination to help the poor never change, she urges her four daughters to be merciful and sympathetic with others. For example, on Christmas morning “Hannah” the servant tells Meg and Jo that their mother goes to see the poor to offer help “some poor creeter came a beggin, and your ma went straight off to see what was needed”*(p.21). In Chapter two Mrs. March encourages her daughters to take their breakfast to the Hummels who are suffering of both hunger and cold. Mrs. March believes that mercy is not only a feeling of compassion and sympathy toward the needy, but it means the sacrifice that others do to make the needy or the poor happy^[26].

According to Sun, Mrs. March practices the notion of mercy, and reveals it with love^[27]. She does not command her daughters to take their breakfast to the poor family, but she uses the imperative sentence “will you” to propose a question “my girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?” (p.23) She shares them the idea of giving the breakfast and to instill the sense of responsibility inside the four girls. Mrs. March is considered as a source of inspiration for her daughters and for the reader, she teaches them that mercy is “compassion combined with forbearance and action”²⁸, it is a channel through which the grace and kindness of the Lord is passed into people. Mercy is brought to the reader's attention as an essential attribute that raises the value of human. It leads them to love others as they love their own selves.

“Sacrifice” is the second moral lesson given in the story. The first example of sacrifice is when the four girls decide not to buy Christmas gifts for themselves and not to spend their money on personal pleasure, but to buy a gift for their mother. The other example is when Jo decides to sell her gorgeous hair (twenty-five dollars) to help her mother who does not have enough money to visit her ill husband in the army.

“Family respect” is the third moral lesson, family is considered as the first institution that influences the lives of children ,it is the first representative of culture, and the first factor in forming the children's behavior. It is the most influential group in the behavior of the individual ,family is the first line of defense, as it is the basic building blocks of the society .

The writer gives importance to the reunion of the family and she gives fine examples of that for example, when Mr. March leaves the home she becomes responsible of managing and protecting her family, she makes sure that compassion, affection and forgiveness prevail among her family. In chapter 8 when Amy burns Jo's manuscript because Joref uses to take her to the theatre Mrs. March does not punish Amy ,but she

* Subsequent reference to this story is: Alcott, L.M. *“Little Women”* (Shanghai: World Publishing Company, 2010)

explains to her the time and effort that Jo spends in writing the manuscript. The mother makes Amy feel shame for what she has done and apologize. Mrs. March kindly tells Jo to control her anger not to let anger controls her and to forgive her sister.

Also when Amy falls through the ice in the river ,Jo feels sad and blames her self or not warning her sister about the danger of the ice in the middle of the river, she tells her mother that anger defeats her. The mother does not scold Jo, conversely, she praises her for saving her sister and brings her home quickly .The mother advises Jo saying: “I’ve been trying to cure it for forty years, and have only succeeded in controlling it. I am angry nearly every day of my life” (p.130).The mother sees her family as a hope of life, the joy of the heart she gives them love, confidence and trust, which in turn help her family to be able to give love to the others .The reader learns from these lines that there is nothing precious and valuable as family .

The fourth moral lesson is “**self-confidence**”, Meg goes to her friend Annie Moffat’s party ,she feels shame from her old fashioned dress, so she lets other girls to dress her up in an elegant style, soon she regrets for being treated as a toy. “Meg” learns as well as the reader that the outside form is not everything, people should not build their relations with others on artificial bases. Elegant clothes do not mean elegant mind.

The fifth moral lesson is“**the self-realization**”. In the story Mrs. March shows high degree of self-realization when she supports the education of the four girls especially after her husband’s participation in the Civil War .*Little Woman* stimulates the female reader to be strong and confident and not to submit to the difficult circumstances only because she is a female .The writer believes that self-sufficiency leads to self –realization. Mrs. March is a strong independent woman. She tries to compensate the role of the man in the family.

Jo struggles in her professional and personal life, she never stops believing in herself and as a result of that she succeeds in publishing her first story. Even in the matter of marriage Mrs. March tells her daughters not get married because they feel they are obliged to or get married for financial purposes, “Money is a needful and precious thing,—and, when well used, a noble thing,—but I never want you to think it is the first or only prize to strive for”(p.161).

The final moral lesson is “**labor appreciation**”. The importance of labor raises from the fact that it is the situation that expresses the human's usefulness in life. Labor makes people live a respectable life ,so both Mr. March and Mrs. March encourage their daughters to work and not waste their time. Mr. March sends a message telling his wife and daughters to make significance of each day.

Mrs. March in chapter 11wants to give her daughters a lesson about the importance of labor she agrees to give them a week of relaxation ,she releases them of all their duties, she tells the girls to do whatever they like to do. (p12). Later, the week becomes a disaster for them the house is dusty and uncomfortable. The reason behind Mrs. March’s decision is give the girls a lesson “hoping to impress the lesson more deeply, Mrs. March, who had a good deal of humor, resolved to finish off the trial in an

appropriate manner ...)"(p.185).She does not in force her daughters to work ,but she teaches them the value of work by their own experiment. After this situation each girl promises to take a task in the home, they start arranging their time between work and fun. Jo becomes more responsible and wiser ,Meg starts helping her mother in making clothes to her father ,while Amy gives her mother a word not to spend her time with music and playing toys. So the girls learn to appreciate time because every minute goes cannot be regained.

Raymie Nightingale is another story which contains moral lessons, this remarkable children story is written by the American writer Kate DiCamillo in 2016. Kate is appointed as an official representative figure of young readers' books in 2014 in America. She is awarded many times for her deep insight fulwritings ^[29].The story *Raymie Nightingale* is about a girl who is ten years old lives alone with her mother, her father flees away with a another woman . Raymie thinks that life would be better with the presence of her father . She decides to participate in the pageant competition, when she wins her father will see her picture in the newspapers and that will motivate him to contact her. The story contains many moral messages for the reader like overcoming loss, patience, friendship, sacrifice, compassion and responsibility^[30] .

The first moral lesson is "**overcoming loss**". In the beginning of the story Raymie is deeply sad for the absence of her father, "Sometimes the pain in her heart made her feel too terrified to go on. Sometimes it made her want to drop to her knees"*(p4).In spite of the pain inside her, Raymie never gives up to her tragedy ,she faces it bravely by making a plan to bring her father back.^[31]

The second moral lesson is "**patience**", one of the requirements to participate in the competition is to do good things and to learn baton twirling, the teacher of this sport is weird and unbearable. She has no desire to teach the girls, but in spite of that Raymie tries her best to control herself, "She herself often felt too terrified to go on, but she had never admitted it out loud"*(p.2)she believes that by patience she can overcome her problems^[32].

The third moral lesson is "**friendship**". When Raymie starts training on baton-twirling ,she meets two girls "Beverly" and "Louisiana". "Beverly" does not like to participate in the competition or to take lessons. She is pushed by her mother to do so, she attends to sabotage the pageant to get out of it. "Louisiana" is an orphan girl who hopes to receive an award from this competition. The three girls have nothing common to share except their feelings toward the teacher "Ida Nee" who is just wasting their time. The girls become friends ,they learn many things as trust and cooperation. The vivid example of cooperation is when they helped each other to get their things back despite the difficulties, also when Raymie stays in the hospital with "Louisiana"^[33].

The forth moral message is "**sacrifice**". Louisiana lives alone with her grandmother, she participates in the competition to give her grandmother the money that she will get in case she wins in the competition ^[34].

Subsequent reference to this story is : DiCamillo, Kate "Raymie Nightingale"(ww.candlewick.com,2016)*

The fifth moral lesson is “**compassion**”. Family provides for children basic needs when they are born and help them survive in this world. It is the place where children learn about this world and acquire abilities to use their senses, speak the first words and take the first step. Family enhance children’s self-confidence and make them feel relaxed while facing a stressful situation. This self-confidence and sense of security will make it easy for them to face the world. So any problem in the family will have a psychological affect on children. It is just like a powerful storm that damages the feelings and the personalities of the children, it throws fear and anxiety in children’s hearts, as well as it instills fear inside children and in the future it will make them lose their stability and safety. Raymie makes different efforts to overcome her problem and to gather her family back again .

The last moral lesson is “**responsibility**”. Raymie is more responsible than the elders, when she speaks she choose suitable words because she does not want to remind her mother about the tragedy that happens, she even never sings the song she loves “Hey, diddle, diddle, the dish ran away with the spoon”(p.2) because this song may hurt the mother’ feelings .

The experiences in the above stories contribute to the development of moral concepts for children. They learn various aspects of their lives, children reflect themselves in each character in the story and take lessons from them ,they response to incidents in a variety of ways, including protesting, fussing and crying .They become able to create new motivation toward perfection of morals. Both stories can be considered as a positive force for developing the young readers, Dr. Seuss believes that children books can contribute in raising the awareness of the society saying: “Children’s reading and children’s thinking are the rock-bottom base upon which this country will rise. Or not rise”^[35].

Conclusion

Children are growing, changing class, with different abilities, personalities and features. If they are once perceived as "young men" and "little women", this may ruin many things in their upbringing and education. Today people became aware of this mistake they realize that children are belong to a world other than the world of the adults. Today more attention has been given for children books.

The study argues that children literature is not only written for pleasure or entertainment, but it is written for helping children to understand and explore the world around them, they will understand that life is not static, there are good and bad things in the society ,these bad things should be avoided. It also develops their discernment and insight. Children Story for instance helps children to learn how to question the reasons of their actions, why they do them and to be responsible of what they do. It helps them indeveloping their value system and ethical standards. It becomes certain for the developed countries that children's books have become a national necessity that contributes in preparing and qualifying the individuals.

Notes

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